

Suicide Bombing and Economic Development

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GERRY YONAS, GYONAS@SANDIA.GOV

BASIL HASSAN, BHASSAN@SANDIA.GOV

TOM KARAS, THKARAS@SANDIA.GOV

Peace in the Middle East seems more elusive than ever. The signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 brought the end of the first Palestinian Intifada (or uprising) against Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, and gave both Israelis and Palestinians a reason to hope for a just and lasting peace in the region. These agreements not only produced hope, but a dramatic drop of violence in the region. Now, nine years later, and after two years of serious conflict, the situation has worsened. Israelis live in fear of suicide bombers, while the daily life of Palestinians is degrading further as a result of Israeli military incursions into areas controlled by the Palestinian National Authority.

Gerry Yonas recently attended a State Department-sponsored workshop on the suicide bombing situation in Israel. At the workshop were Israelis who are engaged on the front line in what may be their most serious battle for normal life since 1948. In a war declared in response to continued Israeli occupation and lack of action in the creation of a Palestinian state, suicide bombers have killed about

250 Israelis (and killed about 350 more in other kinds of attacks)¹, and have seriously injured thousands more. Suicide bombers have become a very effective guided missile weapon, provoking an escalating response—including more incursions, assassinations, curfews, demolitions, deportations—leading to the deaths of about 1600 Palestinians (at the time this article was written),² including hundreds of noncombatants.³ That response, in turn, has destroyed what little economic prosperity the Palestinians had, increased their desperation and hopelessness, and strengthened their commitment to fighting Israel. At the same time, suicide bombings have increased fear in Israelis, weakened their morale, and damaged their economy. With the inability of the leadership on both sides to deal with important issues (Israeli settlements on the West Bank, status of Palestinian refugees, borders of a future Palestinian state, status of Jerusalem), the prospect for real and lasting peace seems dim.

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Resentment of continued military occupation, hopelessness, religious fanaticism, nationalism, peer pressure, clever leadership, financial compensation, and desires for respect have all contributed to the recruitment of suicide bombers—with seemingly more recruits every day. In the U.N. publication, the *2002 Arab Human Development Report* (www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr), Palestinian leader Hanan Ashrawi described her view of the root cause of Palestinian desperation:

“The tenacious pursuit and proclamation of our human development agenda are rapidly being overpowered by the deafening din of the occupation’s military onslaughts. Imprisoned on our own lands by a multiple, and suffocating, state of siege, our homes and institutions are being shelled and bombed on a daily basis, our activists and leaders assassinated, while innocent children and adults are murdered in cold blood. Prevented from laying claim to our resources and rights, we witness our lands being confiscated and our crops and trees destroyed. Israeli military checkpoints fragment our human and territorial continuity and have become the most brutal expression of discriminatory and pervasive system of willful humiliation and subjugation.”

In a 2002 article which appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, Israeli analyst, Gal Luft, says:

“Palestinians are coming to see suicide attacks as a poor man’s smart bomb that can miraculously balance Israel’s technological prowess and conventional military dominance...according to a mid-May poll, two

thirds of Palestinians say that the second intifada's violence has achieved more for them than did the previous years of negotiations." (*The Palestinian H-Bomb: Terror's Winning Strategy*, Foreign Affairs, July/August 2002)

Even if Israel stops 9 out of 10 bombers, there are many more ready to go if a mutually acceptable peace between Israelis and Palestinians cannot be reached. The continuing drain on the psyche, societal cohesion, and economic stability of both sides may lead them to do more and more desperate things. The majority of Israelis and Palestinians who want peace are forced to live in continual disruption from the vicious circle of suicide bombings and military incursions. When will it all end?

One possibility under consideration is to build a wall along the Green Line, since the wall around Gaza is extremely effective. But building such a wall would be very hard to do along the length of Israel, and practically impossible in Jerusalem and the West Bank settlements. For many Israelis it would represent a failure to learn to live with their neighbors in a true democracy.⁴ Nevertheless, Israel may decide it is necessary to build the wall. Will it work? Any defense usually results in an improved offense. It is too easy to shoot a missile over a wall. So then what? Fire missiles back? One can only hope for a road to peace and freedom for both sides before the region sinks further into chaos. If the Israelis begin to sacrifice their values, such as avoiding undue loss of civilian life, and apply even more violent repression, then the terrorists will win over even the moderate Arabs. Even the one million Israeli Arabs could be recruited to the Palestinian cause. Until Palestinians see real progress and improvements in their way of life, we may never see this conflict end.

As we learned on September 11, 2001, Palestinians are not the only ones in the Islamic world who have amongst their numbers a minority of extremists who distort the teachings of their religion to justify terrorism. Other terrorist groups, and those who support them, may be drawing conclusions from what they see in the Israeli conflict: They are likely to try similar tactics against us, whom they see as evildoers who support Israel no matter what and have invaded their holy lands. They could also attack our allies, including those that are not so sure about us and could be turned against us. In addition, terrorist alliances resulting in the transfer of ever more lethal weapons—maybe even weapons of mass destruction—are likely. Their goal will be to provoke us into doing things that will get them more recruits and further polarize others in the world against us, leading to an expanding cycle of escalation.

Maybe a brilliant show of force and military success in Iraq will give us the upper hand over terrorism, as suggested by Richard Perle and Bernard Lewis. But making war on Iraq could backfire if we do not have a quick and almost surgical victory, and instead wind up killing many civilians or destroying their lives—all televised live on CNN.

Is there another way out of this mess?

"At least some Palestinians think that suicide bombings do not serve Palestinian interests."

At least some Palestinian leaders think that suicide bombings do not serve Palestinian interests. Recently the senior Palestinian official negotiating with Israel said he had told all Palestinian factions

"Stop the suicide bombings, stop the murders with no reason. Return to the legitimate struggle against the occupation, without violence and following international norms and legitimacy...Children were exploited for these attacks, when they could have made a much more positive contribution to future Palestinian society." (Abdel Razak Yehiyeh, interview in Israeli newspaper, *Yediot Ahronot*, quoted by Serge Schmemmann, *New York Times*, August 31, 2002)

Unfortunately, the Al Aqsa martyr's brigade and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine rejected this call.⁵

The Israelis at the meeting Gerry attended were the tactical and operational war fighters. Their time horizon was minutes to weeks. None had a long-term perspective, like that of Stef Wertheimer, an Israeli industrialist who together with Jordanians is proposing joint economic development in the city of Aqaba. Wertheimer's formula is: "common interests plus successful economies minus jealousy and hostility equals peace." When Gerry mentioned him at the meeting, he was described as "an old man." Someone said that a more suitable spokesman for peace would be the Mayor of Haifa, Amram Mitzna, who is rapidly becoming a force in Israeli politics. As it turns out, Gerry had dinner with Mitzna in 1998, when he spoke with excitement and confidence about the prospects for peaceful coexistence, trading land for peace, and mutual economic development.

Maybe such ideas are still alive. In another issue of *Foreign Affairs*, A. Robert Abboud and Newton Minow call for an "economic path out of conflict." They claim that

"...peace and goodwill flourish only when people have hope and a vision of better lives for their children. Violence and acrimony take over when people believe things cannot get worse and they have nothing to lose. Without economic development and investment, there is no hope and no vision of better lives ahead." (*Advancing Peace in the Middle East*, *Foreign Affairs*, October 2002.)

So what do the Israelis and Palestinians want? A continuation of their current state of conflict? Certainly not. Peace with secure borders, normal lives for their families, and economic prosperity? Surely yes. However, as important as economic well-being is, any economic path out of conflict will be strongly tied to a political solution.

Over the years many political solutions have been proposed. A solution favored by many Palestinians is a single, democratic, secular state (call it Israel, Palestine, or whatever) where all (Christians, Muslim, and Jews) are treated as equals. This is the kind of state that many Americans would see as reasonable—one that we strive for ourselves. While in theory such a solution seems plausible, in practice it will probably never happen. Given the history of Israel, it is clearly not ready to accept a non-Jewish state. For their part, many Arabs will continue to resent the very presence of Jews in what they believe to be Palestinian territory. Extremists on both sides would favor kicking out all the Jews or all the Arabs, respectively.

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No matter which cause one may believe is the most just, neither group is going anywhere—neither has the ability to expel the other from the region. So it seems that the two-state solution is the most practical one. A recent proposal from the Arab League called for the creation of a Palestinian State on the territories occupied by the Israelis during the 1967 war, including all of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem as its capitol. For the Palestinians, this represents roughly 22% of the original Palestinian mandate, but it is probably the best territorial settlement for which they can hope. For the Israelis, this is also probably the best deal they will get in return for lasting peace with their Arab neighbors. The Arab League proposal also called for the right of return (or suitable compensation) for the 1948 Palestinian refugees, just as all Jews around the world are allowed to immigrate to Israel. Israeli Arabs and Jewish settlers would both be given the option of staying and abiding by each country's rules or leaving to the other country. While this idea would pose many problems for Israel and still not satisfy many Palestinians, it may be the best that either side can hope for; the minority of extremists on both sides would have to learn to live with it.

If such a political solution could be reached, then mutually beneficial economic development would be the obvious path forward. Israel's economy is in recession; the Palestinian economy is essentially non-existent. Palestinians now living in many countries are some of the most highly educated people in the world, and many would likely return to a Palestinian nation-state to help build the new society. The combination of foreign investment and a rerouting of dollars originally earmarked for military and security purposes would go a long way to fostering economic development for both Israel and Palestine. Moreover, there would be many opportunities for collaboration in areas of mutual dependence, such as water, agriculture, and tourism.

A brighter future is possible if the sides can just see their way past this conflict, which has blighted the lives of millions for many years. The Arab and Israeli sides must each decide whether they can really achieve their maximal goals of eliminating or subduing the other, or whether clinging to those goals will only lead to an endless cycle of despair and destruction. If they decide to pursue more realistic goals, then there is a path to peace and prosperity that they can follow together. And the United States should be ready to help, because the costs of helping are likely to be much less than the costs of the current pattern of unending conflict.

References:

¹According to the Israel Defense Forces (www.idf.il/daily_statistics/english/6.gif).

²According to the Palestine Red Crescent Society (http://www.palestinercs.org/crisistables/table_of_figures.htm).

³The Israeli-based *International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism* (www.ict.org.il/articles/articledet.cfm?articleid=439) estimated that Israelis have killed some 600 Palestinian non-combatants. It also estimated that about 70 Palestinian females have been killed, while about 190 Israeli females have been killed.

⁴Already an eroding dream. Until recently the majority of the Israelis were willing to trade land for peace, but that support is slipping.

⁵*Israeli Court Approves Palestinian Expulsions*, New York Times, Associated Press, September 3, 2002.